

VAULT DWELLER

A story of the Spiralchain

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Onus

"I am Anna Stein," she said in the argent glow of the emptiness. Once, not long ago—if time meant anything anymore, and she wondered at that quite often—this had been a place of darkness. The comforting emptiness of the thoughtspace was only ever lit by two things: the inner glow of a living mind and the radiant rectangular windows of accessed memories.

Since coming to this particular corner of thoughtspace, Anna had not had a single moment's respite from the piercing glow of living minds and accessed memories. There were hundreds of minds in this place with her, thousands of memories... and all of them vied endlessly for her attention.

"I am Anna Stein," she said aloud, more to remind herself than to inform anyone else.

"This was a mistake, child," a voice murmured. This was one of the strong ones, the close ones—a mind held in the Vault itself rather than in the remains of the Soul tower. Few had the extant power to distinguish themselves from the chaos, but this one did. She could gather nothing from its thoughts—no sense of identity or agenda at all. But that was, of course, because Anna was not a Mindshaper. Not anymore. Her magic had been taken away by a Wyr on Pithysia, and yet still she had convinced the previous Collectress of the Kem, Shayra, to pass the mantle on to her.

"You are a child," the voice said. "Less than a child—a baby."

"My body is young," Anna insisted, "but my mind is old."

"Those are relative words. But you are not wrong. You are unique—unique in countless ways. Your uniqueness was a powerful lure to the others—they saw how different you are from Shayra and they thought you might deliver them into flesh where she had spent nearly twenty years failing to do so."

"And I will," Anna said. "In the new way—I will teach the minds how to live together, how to form something new from their union, like I have done."

“Without magic?” the voice questioned. “How, precisely, will you pass even a single one of these minds into a new body without any power of your own?”

“Shayra believed in me,” Anna said in an effort to avoid the question. She had an idea of how she could do such a thing... but she was not willing to share it with this strange old voice. She did not believe anyone in her mind could be trusted. The Kem had been keepers of unsavory secrets for far too long.

The events that had led to this moment played out around her, flickering windows of memory stirred by the stranger. Shayra’s desperation to be quit of the burden of serving as Collectress and Anna’s insistence that she could carry that burden. The resistance of many in Kem Nought to the proposal. The final victory of Anna and Shayra. The moment where the Vault of Personality was passed from Shayra to Anna. Her waking here in this silver-blue emptiness, unable to return to the waking world.

It had been her idea, she knew that... but she never imagined that she would become trapped in her own mind, disconnected from any sensation of her tiny two-year-old body or the world around her. She’d thought she was doing the right thing to help her parents and the Children of the Line, to help Steven—the very thought of him brought her such terrible loneliness—but clearly, she’d made a mistake.

“The former Collectress was ill-equipped for the role and then forced to take it while we lurked in isolation in a secluded Kem Nought, withdrawn from the world at the insistence of the Wyr and the Council. The weight of our minds upon her, unable to be relieved for nearly twenty years, was more than any mind could bear. She would have done anything to be quit of those responsibilities, and you represented an option too intriguing for the masses to resist.”

Anna thought about this. Perhaps she *had* preyed upon Shayra’s desire to be free. Was she the sort of person who did that type of thing?

“Might I ask a question of history?” she asked.

“I have seen too well the dangers of an ill-equipped Collectress. I would be a terrible fool to wish to see you follow that same path. Any question within my power to answer, I will answer,” the voice replied in its affectless tone.

“Why is a Collectress required?” Anna asked. “I know in my heart that it’s my responsibility to carry this burden, but... why does the burden exist at all?”

“For that, you can blame Carridan,” the voice replied. It spoke that name with an intensity that almost revealed some aspect of its personality, but then immediately faded back into neutral tones. “The early days of the Kem were far less civilized. The culture of

Onus suffered from a vast amount of intentional obfuscation—much of our oldest history was deliberately taken from our people as part of the formation of the Council and the eight mystic orders. Carridan was one of the greatest of that early generation of Kems, and he saw opportunity in the deliberate pruning and deletion of memory. He sought to set himself apart, to become the greatest of all Mindshapers. In those days, we had not yet begun to take new bodies upon the end of our first ones... but Carridan learned that he could find young people whose magic had not yet awakened and take that power from them. Instead of taking the body for his own, he took the magic. This extraction left the young person dead, their mind destroyed and their magic permanently fused to his own... and after only a handful of these vile murders, Carridan wielded unmatched power."

Flickers of memory came to Anna, and she realized this voice was one who had first-hand experience of these events. She saw this Carridan, an ordinary looking man, and she watched him murder others, often children, to take their power for himself. She felt, through the memories, the sheer power of him... power that made even the energies of the Source tower seem faded and feeble.

"We banded together to stop him, knowing that Carridan would bring the wrath of the whole of Onus down upon us if people learned of his crimes and ambitions. Working together, we found a means to deprive him of his body. We knew that it mattered not how strong a mind was or how great its power; without a body to anchor it to the physical world, it was impotent. The ritual of collaboration was delicate and required months to learn and prepare through dangerous trial and error... but when it was done, we plucked Carridan's mind from its body and ended the threat. But the Betrayal of Carridan changed us—it caused us to fear the loss of knowledge and power of our elders. There was nothing to prevent such a foe from arising within our masses again—especially when rogue Mindshapers, the so-called Telepaths, began to appear and refused to join the Order of Kem. All we could do was ensure that we would always be ready to stand against such an enemy when they returned. So we decided to begin collecting our own minds, as we had collected his... to gather them up and store them away, returning them to life with careful deliberation so that there would always be those ready to stand against such evils close at hand."

"Wait," Anna said, feeling quite anxious, "the same method used to disembody Carridan is what allows us to switch bodies?"

"The same," the voice said.

"So is... is he here?"

"In the Vault? No. The first Collectress, chosen when it became clear we needed someone to have the final say over when a mind was to be reinvested in a body, made it clear that there were no circumstances under which Carridan's mind would be allowed to return to a body—it was too badly corrupted by the mistakes it had made."

"Then his mind was destroyed?"

"No... it is held in isolation in the crystal foundations of the Flesh. Few know this—only the Collectresses, in fact."

"But you know it?"

"So I do. Curious," the voice said with a hint of amusement.

Anna, suddenly hungry to learn more, asked, "Has another like Carridan surfaced?"

"No—but that is largely believed to be because the first Collectress made the wise decision to add a second safeguard. Not only did we act to ensure that the Kem would always know what to do when such a traitor came to exist... but we also ensured that such a traitor would never come to exist again. It was only a year after the creation of the Vault of Personality and the dedication of the Soul tower that the Collectress decreed that there would be no more new minds added to the Kem—that we would instead judiciously parse out the minds already dedicated to our ideals. She feared new ideas and that from new ideas a new Carridan might arise."

"And this is why every new Kem found is brought here and has their mind overwritten by one of the veteran Mindshapers held in the tower or the Vault," Anna said.

"*Almost* every Kem," the voice corrected. "There have been a few bungled investitures over the years—moments when the new mind was not entirely wiped in the process, or was not wiped at all, like with your—with Rebecca. And then there is you—a mind that is both new and old. A mind that should have been obliterated from the transfer of the Vault and yet... was not."

"Why? Why should this have killed me? Is it because my magic is gone?" Anna demanded, desperate for an answer.

"As deplorable as the idea of entrusting the greatest minds of our order to one without magic is, that is not the problem. No... you are Tatyana Secondhost, whether you admit it or not. And the Vault consumes utterly the quality of the mind that can tolerate reinvestiture. It requires a full measure of that quality to endure the transfer... and you have already used up a portion of it. Yet here you are—alive and, despite all

reasonable expectation, sane.”

“So... every Collectress is a new Kem, not an old mind in a new body?”

“By necessity.”

“That means that every time you pick a new Collectress, you risk new ideas, right? A new Carridan?”

“That is why the Vault contains the most experienced and capable minds of the order... we serve as advisors to the Collectress, to ensure she makes no grievous mistakes. But we are merely voices... and we can be ignored. Shayra, for instance... she has ignored us far too often. Taking Narred as a husband. Lowering the invisibility defenses of the academy to make us more *approachable* to the masses. Sacrificing parts of the towers to serve as prisons to those Obliviate creatures. And more. Then she began to espouse the philosophy of merging rather than overwriting... and we knew we could tolerate her radicalism no longer.”

Anna puzzled over all of this, fitting together her unseen advisor’s wisdom with the facts she had already collected during her short life in this body and her time of disembodied observation lurking in the corners of Becky’s mind.

“How many lives have you led?” she wondered.

“Only the one—but it was one fraught with peril. I was Collectress immediately before Shayra. I was the one who authorized the brothers, Urellus and Jaes, to coordinate the great erasure of memory that set our order on the path to ruin. Suffice it to say, I had a great many mistakes to learn from. This is why it alarms me how resistant to heeding my advice Shayra became... and why I hope to foster a more collaborative relationship with you, little one.”

“Can I see you?” Anna asked. “Is that permitted? It is... it’s very lonely in here.”

“You strike upon the central irony of our work, Tatyana. We are never alone with our thoughts, and yet always alone—always apart from the world in which we move.”

“My name,” Anna asserted firmly, “is Anna.”

“Is it?” the voice asked. A moment later, the speaker appeared before her, filmy and translucent, but detailed enough to see in the fullness of three dimensions. She was cast in the same argent light that comprised this entire space, which made her fade in and out of visibility at an almost strobe-like pace. She was shorter than either of Anna’s parents, perhaps only an inch above five feet—a stark contrast to Shayra’s lanky frame. The

woman was of middle age, with weather-beaten skin and a smooth-shaven scalp. She wore a sheer gown like that of her replacement, but it revealed a stouter frame, including notably muscular shoulders. “Whatever you call yourself, it is my pleasure to meet you, Sixth Collectress of the Kem. I am Valluria. I was born on Ray Fen, not far from here in the grand scheme of things. And I would take you under my wing if you would have me.”

Anna fought a strange urge to touch the woman—as insubstantial as she seemed to be, the idea of being able to touch someone else all but overcame her with emotion. The isolation of this radiant thoughtspace had affected her more deeply than she imagined.

“I have answered many questions for you, young one—and will gladly answer more. But might you answer one for me?” Valluria asked.

Anna felt the first nervous coil of apprehension rise up in her heart. As much as she wanted a friend, as much as she wanted to know what was going on and how to get out of this place and back to her body, she realized that there was still no reason to consider any voice in this place to be trustworthy.

She’d decided to become Collectress in part because she thought it was her destiny... but more so because she wanted to change the way the Kem worked. This woman before her now was an embodiment of over a century of Kem practices that she found deplorable... and she would most assuredly be hoping to court Anna to her perspective.

“Me first,” Anna said firmly, reaching down to grab at the shimmering blue fabric of her imagined dress. She had not yet adopted the taste for sheer fabrics that seemed common to the Collectresses—at least not here in the projection of her inner self that stood upon the formless shores of thoughtspace. In the real world, she imagined her comatose toddler body was already garbed in something unsettlingly revealing.

“Of course,” Valluria said with a little frown.

“I’m still trying to understand all of this body-changing stuff. What are the rules for such a thing? If I’m supposed to be in charge of deciding who’s given new bodies, I should know the limitations of the process. Obviously, our new bodies don’t have to be Onusborn. My mother’s from Core, and she handled the transfer of my—of Tatyana’s—magic and memories fine.” That was a bit of an oversimplification, but this woman didn’t need to know that. “Are there limits on who can be invested?”

In her former life, she had worked at a law firm—she’d even contemplated a career connected to the law in some way. She wanted to see the pattern of rules and order that somehow made the practice of body-stealing acceptable to these people.

Valluria nodded. "Onusborn bodies are the best, primarily because they have a greater likelihood of developing Mindshaper power on their own. The synergy between a Kem mind and a body capable of mindshaping is powerful and positively enhances the core mind in all subsequent investitures. But other bodies can suffice. Humans are ideal, but non-humans are possible, though often for shorter periods of time."

That prompted another question in her. "Can a Kem mind that was originally not Onusborn be transferred?"

"There is no such thing as a Kem mind that isn't Onusborn. Even if an Onusborn Mindshaper gives birth to a child on another world, with parentage from that world, the Onusborn blood is what carries the Mindshaper potential," she admonished.

Anna shook her head. "My mother is a Kem—or at least a Mindshaper. And she's Coreborn. Can she be transferred?"

"The fact that you were able to separate your personality from your magic is, frankly, completely unfathomable to us. Rebecca should have either become Tatyana Secondhost and retained her magic or she should have *not*. You are a bundle of contradictions... but I know this much: Rebecca has no ability to be reinvested. No Coreborn mind could survive the process."

"You said that taking up the mantle of Collectress meant destroying the... the chance to move on to other bodies. Tell me about that."

"It is somewhat prosaically referred to as the Law of Seven Bodies," Valluria said. "For reasons that I confess to never investigating more deeply during my tenure, a mind can safely handle re-investiture a maximum of six times for a total of seven bodies. Each time the working that integrates the mind into the body so that the two can function seamlessly is completed, it uses up a measure of something precious—some among us call it vital force. Something unique to Onusborn, which is why Rebecca would be unable to transition to a new body."

"What happens if you *try* to put a mind in its eighth body?" Anna asked, unable to suppress her curiosity.

"We don't," the elder Collectress said. "Ever. Most believe it will simply fail, resulting in the loss of the mind and the death of the proposed body."

"What do you believe?"

"I believe that it wasn't until Carridan absorbed his seventh victim that he tried to take over the world, so it isn't worth exploring," Valluria said firmly.

"I suppose that makes sense. So this vital force—all of it is consumed in the process of becoming Collectress. That would mean that if I tried to switch bodies, it would be like taking an eighth body. In both cases, all of that stuff is used up. Is that right?"

"Precisely. Which is why former Collectresses, like the handful of Seventhhosts in our history, are always promoted from dwelling in the Soul Tower to dwelling here in the Vault of Personality properly. Think of this place as a pair of adjoining villages. In one you have those retired from corporeal concerns by necessity. In the other you have those most ready to return to bodies. One village of the mind to advise you, and the other to incessantly remind you of your duty to the Order of Kem. It was their whining that wore Shayra down—I hope you have a bit more steel in your spine."

"You've never met my parents," Anna said with a smile.

"Neither have you," Valluria said sharply.

Anna narrowed her eyes. "My parents are Joseph Stein and Rebecca Hanson."

"Your body's parents, perhaps, Tatyana Secondhost. But you are not some toddling whelp of two summers. You stand before me a full-grown adult, the Child of the Line whose existence I broke every law in our order to protect. You are a product of one of these so-called 'kind merges' that Shayra now favors, nothing more. Ignore the truth of yourself at your peril."

"If this is my second body," Anna shouted, feeling the unseen ground on which they stood tremble with her anger, "then how did I survive the transfer of the Vault? How can I be Collectress?"

"That is precisely the question I would ask of you," Valluria said. She drew closer, extending a hand towards Anna's shoulder. Anna swatted it away but stood her ground. Valluria narrowed her eyes and asked, "We can access your memories against your will if we wish—without your magic, you cannot hope to erect a shield strong enough to stop us. But we would rather not. Give us access, and I will take the lead—I will ensure you are unharmed by the act."

"What do you want from my memories?"

"Something has happened to you—something beyond our understanding. We would learn how you survived the investiture, and I don't believe you consciously know the answer. I will give you a gift afterwards—something I believe may be of great value to you."

"Will you restore me to my body?" Anna asked.

“Alas—our sphere of influence extends only to the Vault where we now stand. It will take intervention from outside to draw you back to your waking body... but I assure you, Shayra is certainly bending all of her talent and wisdom to the task. No... I will give you a piece of information. That is all we have here, after all... memory. But I remember something very important that I would be willing to share with you in exchange for access to your memories.”

Anna considered this offer, but she knew that Valluria was correct—resisting would be futile in the end without her magic.

“I ask you leave my memories of Steven alone,” she said. “All else I open to you—I have no secrets. But don’t touch Steven.”

“Of course. This should take only a moment or two,” the former Collectress said. She laid one strobing hand across Anna’s forehead, standing up a bit on her toes to do so, and then, almost instantly, the woman’s eyes opened wide and burst into blazing blue radiance.

Valluria recoiled, dropping to the unseen ground and gasping.

Anna rushed to her, kneeling and offering what support she could, but the elder Kem pushed her hands away.

“You—you are not human,” she said with a pained gasp. “Not fully. Not anymore.”

“I don’t understand,” Anna said.

“You... you have an aspect of one of the native peoples in you. On the frozen world of Arctos, you touched a young creature.”

“Prejirok-Da,” Anna said. “I played with a Kutak cub there.”

“Somehow, that child transferred a portion of its essence to you. The Kutaks are only scarcely known to us—few Kem traveled to Arctos and those that did spent no time in their wilderness. But I understand them to be particularly resilient creatures?”

“They can’t die,” Anna said. “No matter how much they want to. Except the cubs, I suppose—*they* can die, at least until they reach a certain age.”

“They are also creatures of the mind,” Valluria prompted. “They use a form of mind speech that is not unlike mindshaping.”

“True.”

“Somehow... your mind has been fortified. I don’t understand, but it must become

the highest priority for our people to replicate the process. Don't you understand? If we can move past the Law of Seven Bodies, we can bring our most powerful and most skilled back to life. We can..."

"What?" Anna asked, her suspicions renewed. She stood and backed slowly away from Valluria. "We can *what*?"

"We can do whatever we want," the elder Kem said. "We have no need to be pawns of the others, ever again. But that is a problem for another day—a problem that can't be solved until Shayra gets you back into your body. For now... let me honor my end of our little bargain."

Anna folded her arms across her chest. "I'm listening."

"Would you like to meet your parents?"

"I already told you—my parents are Joseph and Rebecca."

"Would you like to meet your *other* parents? The ones from whom you were taken when the Wyr ordered you spirited away to Core?"

Anna felt her imagined flesh grow cold. "They... they're here?"

"Of course. Two latent talents, undiscovered until we attempted to erase you from their memories... we brought them to Kem Nought for safe keeping. We brought them into the vault for safe keeping."

Anna stared at Valluria as she stood, unable to process the conflict in her heart. On one hand, she wanted to refute the idea that these two people meant anything to her—Anna had two parents who loved her. But on the other, she wanted to meet them. Tatyana had grown up in the foster care system, always wondering about the parents who had given her up even before they had learned that those parents were the *second* set of people to let her go.

Anna was of two minds on the issue. Literally.

The unity of self she had so carefully cultivated over the past two years fractured and split, cleaving jagged cracks in her very nature... and she could not help but think this was exactly what Valluria wanted.